

The Obliteration of Townland Boundaries

By Michael Hall

Townlands are the smallest administrative divisions in the countryside and are essential referencing systems for locating people. The Gaelic system of landholding had a more detailed but fragmented referencing system of which we know little. Many old divisions were abolished in the mapping programmes of past centuries or died with the Irish language. The townland as we know it today represents a great variety of units of measurement for taxing land in one way or another, such as ploughlands, gneeves, trines, tates, shillings, spades and pottles. The area of a townland was defined in terms of how much arable land it held or how much taxation it could bear, which are of course closely interrelated. The townland became standardised from the seventeenth century onwards and was further clarified by the completion of the first edition (six inches to the mile) Ordnance Survey maps. It was the bedrock of the estate system and estates were generally made up of blocks of townlands. In the same way the townland was adopted both by the Census Commissioners and Government valuers as their base unit of enumeration and taxation. These units represent the oldest divisions of land in the countryside. The word townland is devised from the Scandinavian *tun*, which means a settlement with enclosures, and in Ireland the term meant the land of the town. "Town" may be synonymous with the Irish *baile*.

Today the position of the townland is central for mapping, identification of land, taxation and general referencing terms, it is significant in a political sense for defining constituencies and electoral areas and is also the basic unit from which parishes, baronies and counties are assembled and as such is used by many voluntary organisations such as the GAA. Unfortunately the townland is now under threat and may soon be only visible from the map. In recent years the sizes of farms have been increased dramatically and farmers have been encouraged to remove field boundaries to enable heavy machinery to move freely and to bring more land into production. However, in removing field boundaries farmers may be destroying one of our most significant heritage items, the townland boundary, which could in some instances also be a county, barony, parish and even a provincial boundary. It is known that many of these boundaries – including in some cases the so-called double ditches – have been removed, so that within a generation the precise location of townland boundaries will be unknown. We will then have lost another link in the history of land use and ownership in Ireland. Townland boundaries should be regarded as a significant feature of our material culture and should be conserved under environmental protection schemes such as the European Union's Rural Environment Protection Scheme ("REPS"), which has promoted consciousness of many aspects of our heritage.

Editorial footnote. – The subject discussed above has been before the committee of the Co. Tipperary Historical Society at recent meetings, and the views of Michael Hall (of the committee) are a fair representation of the majority view of the committee. Readers are invited to comment; views should be sent to The Editor at Co. Library Head Office, Castle Ave., Thurles.